

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 206

CS 510 926

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TITLE Moby-Dick. [Lesson Plan].
INSTITUTION Discovery Communications, Inc., Bethesda, MD.
PUB DATE 2002-00-00
NOTE 11p.; Audio and video clips included in the web site version of this lesson plan are not available from ERIC.
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PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Characterization; Class Activities; English Instruction; *Journal Writing; Language Arts; Lesson Plans; *Literature Appreciation; *Novels; Secondary Education; Vocabulary Development; Writing Assignments

ABSTRACT

Based on Herman Melville's novel "Moby-Dick," this lesson plan presents activities designed to help students understand that the novel is grounded in facts that Melville acquired in his own experiences at sea; New England was the center of a prospering whaling industry in the 19th century; and journal keeping was not uncommon among 19th-century Americans. The main activity of the lesson involves students taking on the persona of an imaginary sailor or captain while he is out at sea on a whaling voyage and writing journal entries. It includes objectives, materials, procedures, adaptations, discussion questions, evaluation methods, extension activities, annotations of suggested readings and web links, vocabulary, and related academic standards and benchmarks addressed in the lesson plan. The lesson plan also contains a description of a video clip related to the lesson, comprehension questions related to the video clip, and answers to those comprehension questions. (RS)



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TITLE OF LESSON PLAN:

Moby-Dick

LENGTH OF LESSON: Two class periods

GRADE LEVEL: 9-12

SUBJECT AREA: Literature

CREDIT: Alisa Soderquist, English, art, and architecture teacher, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, Alexandria, Virginia.

OBJECTIVES:

Students will understand the following:

1. *Moby-Dick* is grounded in facts that Melville acquired in his own experience at sea.
2. New England was the center of a prospering whaling industry in the 19th century.
3. Journal keeping was not uncommon among 19th-century Americans.

MATERIALS:

For this lesson, you will need:

History textbooks and other materials about 19th-century America, especially the whaling industry

Access to reviews of *Moby-Dick* over the course of its publication history

PROCEDURE:

1. Invite students to demonstrate their knowledge of the whaling trade in 19th-century America and the hardships involved. Ask them to do further research on the topic of the whaling industry in New England in the early 1800s so that they can take on the persona of an imaginary sailor or captain while he is out at sea on a whaling voyage.
2. Based on their research, students should compose at least five journal entries by the sailor or captain. Here are some possible topics for students' research and journal entries:

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- Information about the port of departure
- Information about the kind of men who signed on for whaling expeditions
- Information about regions to which the ship travels
- Information about how the crew spends its day waiting for whale sightings
- Information about a whale chase and kill

3. Another option you may give students is to use their research to write the journal entries from the point of view of Starbuck, Stubb, or Flask instead of from the point of view of characters whom students make up.

4. To get the feel of what 19th-century journals sound like, suggest that students read some of Melville's own entries. (Remind students that Melville based much of *Moby-Dick* and other adventures on what he saw for himself when he was at sea.) The following original sources in their latest editions will help:

- *Journal of a Visit to London and the Continent*, edited by E.M. Metcalf (Harvard University Press, 1948)
- *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant*, edited by H.C. Horsford (Princeton University Press, 1955)
- *The Melville Log*, edited by Jay Leyda (Harcourt, 1951)
- *Herman Melville: Cycle and Epicycle*, edited by E.M. Metcalf (Harvard University Press, 1953)

5. Direct students to include in their made-up journal entries not merely facts of a fictional voyage but the feelings of the journal keeper as well, especially shifts in emotions over long periods at sea.

6. You can have students decorate the journal entries with designs sailors may have created— sketches of ships, boats, whales—during their voyages.

ADAPTATIONS:

Have students generate only one or two journal entries.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think is the significance of Moby-Dick's color?
2. Ishmael is allowed to survive the destruction of the Pequod. What views do you think Herman Melville is expressing through this outcome?

3. You learn in the book that both Ahab and Ishmael are Biblical names. What does the use of Biblical names have upon your interpretation of the story?
4. What elements of *Moby-Dick* do you think made it a failure with audiences at the time it was published, yet make it highly regarded and popular today?
5. In his quest for the great white whale, Ahab seems obsessed with the desire to conquer something else. What do you think that something else is?
6. How valid do you think it is to interpret *Moby-Dick* as containing an environmental message?

EVALUATION:

You can evaluate your students on their journal entries using the following three-point rubric:

Three points: meets the minimum of at least five entries; includes many historical facts appropriate to the time and place of the written pieces; shows correct grammar, usage, and mechanics

Two points: meets the minimum of at least five entries; includes some historical facts appropriate to the time and place of the written pieces; shows mostly correct grammar, usage, and mechanics

One point: does not meet the minimum of at least five entries; does not include historical facts; shows significant errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics

You can ask your students to contribute to the assessment rubric by determining how many historical facts should be required. With sophisticated classes, you may give students the option to include grammar, usage, and mechanics that may be wrong in standard English but that they can justify as appropriate to the education (or lack thereof) of a persona.

EXTENSION:

Reactions to *Moby-Dick*

The American public did not react positively to *Moby-Dick* when it was first published. Ask students to track the critical reaction to the novel from its original publication to the current day. They will have to find primary sources such as book reviews from various points in the last 150 years. Ask students not only to report on how critical opinions about the novel have changed but also to suggest why the changes took place.

Disaster News

The *Pequod* begins its fateful journey from Nantucket to find Moby-Dick on Christmas Day. Pretend you are a 19th-century reporter for the fictitious *Nantucket Gazette*. Write a short article (150 to 200 words) about the end of the *Pequod*. Include as much objective information as you can. You may include quotations or information from an interview with Ishmael.

SUGGESTED READINGS:**"In Melville's Lifetime, Fame Proved Fickle"**

Robert Wernick, *Smithsonian*, July 1995

Typee

Herman Melville, 1846

WEB LINKS:**The Life and Works of Herman Melville**

This site is a publication dedicated to disseminating information about Herman Melville on the Internet. If you need biographical or bibliographical texts on Melville, this is a treasure trove of information on the writer.

<http://www.melville.org/>

Whales in Literature

This site certainly shows the impact whales have had in literature. View the word's etymology and then thumb through texts such as the Bible, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

<http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/as/Literature/Moby-Dick/amlit.whale-pages.html>

The World Wide Web Virtual Library: Whale-Watch

Whale watching has become a thrilling and somewhat religious experience for many. At this site the learner can view migration maps and pictures of these gentle giants.

<http://www.physics.helsinki.fi/whale/>

Whales of the World Educational Program

This educational site is one that your students will enjoy. There are many interactive activities that will show your students what whales eat, where they can be viewed, and what the major types of whales are that can be found on our planet.

http://www.webcom.com/iwcwww/teachers_kit/learn.html

Baleen Whales

Sea World has designed a visual resource that can be adapted for all age groups. Your students can create a very impressive booklet on baleen whales from the information they gather from this site.

http://www.seaworld.org/baleen_whales/baleen_whales.html

VOCABULARY:

allegory

A literary device in which fictional characters symbolically represent a moral or universal principle.

Context:

Melville creates a cosmic allegory out of the unglamorous whaling industry.

idyllic

Pleasingly beautiful in a simplistic or natural way.

Context:

He lived an idyllic childhood until the age of eleven, when his father fell deeply in debt and then unexpectedly died a year later.

nemesis

A formidable opponent bent on retribution or vengeance.

Context:

For two days, Ahab tries to kill his nemesis, but *Moby-Dick* will not die.

premonition

Forewarning or presentiment of an event.

Context:

Melville had a premonition that *Moby-Dick* would not be accepted by the American public.

unprecedented

Never having been done before; without precedent.

Context:

It was a time of unprecedented change; the Industrial Revolution was transforming the American landscape.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: language arts

Standard: Demonstrates a familiarity with selected literary works of enduring quality.

Benchmark:

Demonstrates an understanding of why certain literary works may be considered classics or works of enduring quality and substance. Demonstrates a familiarity with a variety of classic American, British, and world literature and their authors (e.g., through literary allusions and literary criticism).

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: the arts

Standard: Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines.

Benchmarks: Knows ways in which various media can be integrated.

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: the arts

Standard: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts.

Benchmark: Understands how the communication of ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes used.

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: behavioral studies

Standard: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts.

Benchmarks: Understands how the communication of ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes used.

Grade Level: 9-12
Subject Area: behavioral studies

Standard: Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions.

Benchmark: Understands that conflict between people or groups may arise from competition over ideas, resources, power, and/or status. Understands that conflicts are especially difficult to resolve in situations in which there are few choices and little room for compromise.

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© Video Information and Comprehension Questions



Video Description

More than just an adventure, "Moby-Dick" is an epic morality play, an allegory of good and evil and of man's relationship to nature. Enjoy a visual feast of historic images and clips from the classic film, plus a compelling portrait of the author.

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[Download Comprehension Questions & Answers ▶](#)

The Comprehension Questions are available to download as an RTF file. You can save the file to your desktop and open it in a word processing program.



TITLE OF VIDEO:

Moby-Dick

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the basic story of *Moby-Dick*?
2. What kind of mood periodically sends Ishmael off to sea?
3. What different things does *Moby-Dick* represent to each of the three main characters?
4. Where did Melville get the material for his earlier, successful novels?
5. What changes did Melville see taking place in the United States at the time he began writing *Moby-Dick*?
6. Why is the world of the *Pequod* in some ways similar to a little democracy?
7. What important realization does Ishmael come to as a result of his experience on the *Pequod*?

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Moby-Dick

VIDEO COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

1. What is the basic story of Moby-Dick?

On the surface, *Moby-Dick* is about Captain Ahab of the whaling ship Pequod, who on a previous voyage lost his leg to the great white whale, Moby-Dick, and is now consumed with the desire to hunt him down and kill him.

2. What kind of mood periodically sends Ishmael off to sea?

When Ishmael senses a darkness in his soul, has morbid thoughts, and becomes argumentative, he knows it is time for him to head out to sea.

3. What different things does Moby-Dick represent to each of the three main characters?

To Captain Ahab, Moby-Dick represents all the evil in the universe; to the first mate, Starbuck, he is merely a whale to be killed for oil; to Ishmael, Moby-Dick represents nature in all its awe-inspiring beauty and terror.

4. Where did Melville get the material for his earlier, successful novels?

At the age of 21, Melville hired on with ships sailing to the South Seas. He wrote about these adventures in two very successful novels, *Typee* and *Omoo*.

5. What changes did Melville see taking place in the United States at the time he began writing *Moby-Dick*?

When Herman Melville began writing *Moby-Dick*, he felt that America was slipping away from the ideals of its founding fathers. He witnessed the Industrial Revolution transforming the American landscape, and he realized that slavery was becoming a critical national issue.

6. Why is the world of the Pequod in some ways similar to a little democracy?

The Pequod and its crew might be seen as resembling a little democracy because the crew is comprised of all races and ethnic groups, and all the men are made equal by their whaling knowledge and skill at sea.

7. What important realization does Ishmael come to as a result of his experience on the Pequod?

From his experience on the Pequod, Ishmael comes to realize that in life there is both great joy and great sorrow. Through this realization, he can be at peace with his universe.

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